The major aim is to provide rural farmers with an additional source of income. ActionAid feels that it is imperative to make efforts to help farmers to increase their spending power — at present the average annual income is around £65.

Beekeeping has great potential because it is a dry-season activity and therefore does not compete with the vital crop-growing work which occurs during the rainy season. Furthermore, it requires little investment in either capital or time.

At workshops trainees learn how to make beekeeping profitable.

In Gambia

Nevertheless, beekeeping is to be found throughout The Gambia. Its practice is now very much limited to the hunting of wild honey: while beekeeping requires the construction and maintenance of hives (called 'Kumbos') made of grass and leaves, wild honey hunting involves just the raiding of nests with fire-torches. Unfortunately most colonies get destroyed in the process.

Indeed, nest raids have increased over the last few years compared to the more time-consuming but favourable practice of hive construction and maintenance. Many bush fires start as a result of these activities which not only limit the quantity of honey available by destroying colonies but also hinder the generation of forest cover.

Honey and beeswax are quite valuable products: its use as a sweetener has declined as imports of sugar have increased, but there is still local demand for both honey and beeswax, both of which are now produced in a limited way during the eight-month dry season from mid-October to mid-June. There is no doubt that this valuable source of food has been neglected in recent years both by government and aid agencies.

It is against this background that ActionAid-The Gambia has decided to promote beekeeping in several of the areas in which it works.

Honey and beeswax have other virtues. The products are non-perishable and hence stored and marketed without the risk of spoiling. Honey can be used for medicinal purposes — nature's 'liquid gold' mixed with lemon is good for colds and it contains iron and vitamins as well. Beeswax is used for tie-dyeing, smoothing leatherwork and patching holes in utensils.

The ecological value of beekeeping is immense. Honeybees perform an indispensable service to humans and their environment during cross-pollination as they ensure the regeneration of plant life. It is reckoned that "the influence of apiculture on agricultural production is 10 or 15 times more important than action by man."

Income doubled

The ActionAid Beekeeping Programme initially involves 10 village apiary groups. Villagers are being equipped by ActionAid and trained by Government personnel, and they will work with their village groups to produce and distribute honey and beeswax. The work will be closely monitored to see if it is feasible to expand it in a year's time.

It is interesting to note that similar work in Kenya by a Canadian agency has resulted in keepers harvesting more than £350 per annum — twice their annual average income. It will be interesting to see what wonders beekeeping can achieve for rural farmers in The Gambia!